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ABSTRACT

Disabled students (58 male and 43 female) attending colleges participating in the Washington D.C. area Coalition of Disabled Student Service Providers were administered a questionnaire to assess their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions within the context of the higher education environment of their particular schools. Students responding to a questionnaire were mobility impaired (25 percent), deaf (17 percent), blind (12 percent), sight impaired (10 percent), wheelchair-quadriplegic (7 percent), wheelchair-paraplegic (6 percent), hearing impaired (5 percent), learning disabled (4 percent), multiply disabled (3 percent), and other (11 percent). Fifty-seven percent were full time students. Seventy-three percent used the disabled student services at their campus, ranging from 100 percent of the multiply disabled to 20 percent of the hearing impaired. Most of the disabled students were comfortable in seeking help with an academic problem from a variety of sources, including parents, counseling center, other students, disabled student services, departmental advisor, faculty member, and academic advisor. The greatest needs of disabled students while in college were financial (31 percent) and assistance with disability (23 percent). About two-thirds had attended public high school with able-bodied students, ranging from 100 percent of the hearing-impaired and multiply-disabled to 24 percent of the deaf students. Factors involved in selecting their university included faculty recommendations, experiences of family or friends, and provisions for the disabled. While 43 percent were quite certain of their career goals, 21 percent felt that health reasons might cause them to leave school, and 38 percent were absolutely sure that they would obtain their degree. (CB)

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THE OTHER MINORITY: DISABLED STUDENT BACKGROUNDS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD THEIR UNIVERSITY AND ITS SERVICES

Aldrich M. Patterson, Jr. , William E. Sedlacek
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SUMMARY

101 disabled students attending colleges of the Washington D.C. area Coalition of Disabled Student Services Providers were administered a questionnaire concerning their characteristics, attitudes, preferences and perceptions. The sample was 25% mobility impaired, 17% deaf, 12% blind and 10% sight impaired, with a mean age of 32 years. 57% of all respondents were full-time, while, deaf (82%) wheelchair-paraplegic (67%) and blind (58%) students indicated the highest percentages of part time. 89% indicated that they had been employed at one time or another, although only 38% were currently employed. 73% reported that they currently use the disabled student services at their campus. 66% had attended a public high school with able-bodied students, ranging from 100% of the hearing impaired and multiply-disabled to 24% of the deaf students. 100% of the students reported that a main reason they came to their school was because a high school teacher or counselor recommended it. 43% were quite certain of their career goals, and 21% felt that health reasons might cause them to leave school, while 38% were absolutely sure they would obtain their degree. Generally, disabled students felt comfortable in social settings where they were the only disabled person, but women felt more comfortable than men. Overall, disabled students felt their school was doing a good job in providing services to them.

Differences by type of disability and implications for faculty and staff are discussed.

The 1970's was the decade in which the disabled movement surfaced and slowly began to diminish the discriminatory practices that have traditionally prevented handicapped persons from entering the mainstream of society. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 made it illegal for institutions that benefited from federal monies to discriminate against disabled individuals who meet all of the qualifications for admittance. This type of legislation helped to ensure access to higher education for disabled persons. Already an increasing number of colleges and universities have shown progress in reducing and modifying physical facilities and program barriers which restrict disabled students (Torres 1984).

On college campuses today, both able-bodied and disabled students enter with the expectation that the time and effort they put forth will in some way improve their quality of life. Although each student's quest for betterment is individualized by aspiration, determination, knowledge, and ability, the goal of living a life of dignity and worth is pervasive. Lifchez and Trier (1979) use the matapior "half-way house" to explain the university's role in assisting all students in making the transition from youth to maturity, while providing a relatively safe environment as many students search for who they are. Historically, this has been important for able-bodied students; and for disabled students, this is of growing importance. Lifchez and Trier make the following statement about the handicapped student experience: "Seeking escape from a role in society largely determined by their disability, and often from a sheltered, if not shut-in, environment, they search for one in which their contribution, their humanness, becomes primary in the eyes of others." (p.23).

There are many barriers confronting disabled people. Often the barriers are physical: things like stairs and curbs, particularly for the mobility-impaired. But as noted by Bailey (1979), perhaps the toughest barriers are attitudinal: patronizing sympathetic sentiments, stereotypes and myths of ineffectiveness. Bailey further notes that "there is a pervasive sense of 'we vs they', the most crippling of all stereotypic mind sets." (p.82).

Studies conducted by Comer and Piliavin (1975), and Weinberg (1976) illustrated that the physically disabled are viewed by the able-bodied as being different on the basis of personality traits, moral characteristics, social abilities and political attitudes. Stovall and Sedlacek (1983) studied differences in reaction of able-bodied students to individuals who were blind and in wheelchairs but there has been little literature on differences among students with different disabilities.

The purpose of this study was to assess the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of disabled students toward their university and its services. Particular attention will be given to differences among students with different disabilities.

Method

Disabled students (58 male and 43 female) attending colleges of the Washington D.C. area Coalition of Disabled Student Service Providers were administered a questionnaire concerning their attitudes, goals and perceptions. The questionnaire was mailed out by participating universities to their disabled students who were identified through the disabled student offices, and a return rate of 75% was obtained. Data were analyzed by Chi-square and two-way (disability by sex) multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) at the .05 level.

Results

General Characteristics

Students chose the one best description of their disability: mobility impaired (25%), deaf (17%), blind (12%), sight impaired (10%), wheelchair-quadraplegic (7%), wheelchair-paraplegic (6%), hearing impaired (5%), learning disabled (4%) multiply-disabled (3%), and other (11%). Ninety three percent were U.S. Citizens. Ethnically, 78% were White, 15% Black, 3% Hispanic, 3% Asian and 1% Native Americans. Their mean age was 32, with a third reporting their ages as 18-22, and 30% over 35. Significant age differences were found, using MANOVA at .05 for sex and disability. Females tended to be older than males; and learning disabled (19 years), hearing impaired (23 years), and sight impaired (25 years) students were significantly younger than the other disabled students. Students with multiple disabilities (47 years), blind (36 years), and deaf (36 years) students were significantly older.

Fifty seven percent of all respondents were full-time students, while deaf (82%), wheelchair-paraplegic (67%) and blind (58%) students indicated the highest percentages of part-time attendance. The classifications of the students were: freshman (10%), sophomore (11%), junior (24%), senior (12%), graduate student (28%), special student (10%), continuing education (1%) and other (5%). Sixty-five percent of the deaf students, 33% of the multiply-disabled students, and 32% of the mobility impaired students were graduate students. Overall, disabled student reported a mean GPA of 3.1 on a four point system.

Disabled students most often lived with a spouse (28%), followed by parents (25%), alone (22%), and a roommate (18%). Their median family income was $17,000 per year with 41% coming from self/spouse, 39% from parents and the rest from other sources.

Table 1 shows the cause of student disabilities by disability group. Students reported being disabled an average (mean) of 18 years.

When asked how the major part of their college expense was being financed, (26%) stated other, (19%) parental support, (13%) vocational rehabilitation funds, (10%) federal aid, (9%) from money earned on part-time and summer jobs, (8%) scholarship, (8%) savings, (4%) veterans benefits, and (2%) social security. Eighty-nine percent indicated that at one time or another they have been employed, although only 38% reported being employed presently. Ninety four percent of the deaf students reported being currently employed, and they made up two-fifths of all employed disabled students. Employed disabled students reported working an average (mean) of 26 hours a week; 49% indicated that they work 20 hours or less a week, 37% work 40 hours a week and 8% work more than 40 hours a week.

Use of Services

Seventy three percent of the students reported that they presently use the disabled student services at their campus. However, results show that student use varies significantly (Chi-square .05) among disability groups: multiply disabled (100%); learning disabled (100%); deaf (88%); blind (83%); wheelchair-quadraplegic (57%); wheelchair-paraplegic (50%); and hearing impaired (20%).

Disabled students were comfortable in seeking help with an academic problem from a variety of sources allowing for multiple responses. 96% of the disabled students reported that if they had an academic problem, they would go to their parents for assistance, followed by counseling center (92%), other students (89%), disabled students services (82%), departmental advisor (82%), faculty member (78%), and academic advisor (65%).

The greatest need of disabled students while in college, was financial (31%), followed by assistance with disability (23%), positive social climate (14%), academic advising (12%), other (10%), tutoring (7%) and housing (2%). A higher need for assistance with disabilities was indicated by wheelchair-paraplegic (50%), learning disabled (50%), multiply disabled (33%) and mobility impaired (28%) students.

Education

A majority (66%) of the disabled students indicated that the last high school they attended was a public school with able-bodied students. This was true for the following student disabilities: hearing impaired (100%), multiply disabled (100%), mobility impaired (88%), sight impaired (80%), learning disabled (75%), other (74%), blind (58%), wheelchair-quadraplegic (50%), and deaf (24%) Nine percent indicated that they attended a public high school for disabled students. Comprising this group were deaf (41%) and blind (17%) students. Eight percent of the students reported attending a private high school (with able-bodied students); wheelchair-paraplegic (33%), blind (17%), wheelchair-quadraplegic (14%), sight impaired (10%), other (9%) and deaf (6%). Eight percent also attended parochial high schools; learning disabled (25%), other (18%), wheelchair-paraplegic (17%), mobility impaired (13%) and deaf (6%). Only 5% of all disabled students attended private schools for the disabled, but 24% of the deaf students and 10% of the sight impaired students attended such private schools.

After completing high school, 36% said that they enrolled at their present university, while 40% reported attending another college first. This pattern tended to differ according to disability. Those students coming directly to their present university after high school were the hearing impaired (80%), learning disabled (75%), students with multiple disabilities (67%) and the sight impaired (60%). The percentage of students who previously attended another college was highest among deaf (70%), mobility impaired (50%) and other (46%) students. Eight percent of the disabled students said that they went to work after completing high school, while 6% attended a trade or vocational school, and 5% served in the military.

Their reasons for attending their present university were that it was suggested to them by a high school teacher or counselor (100%), and friends or relatives formerly attended and/or presently attended their university (96%). Provisions for the disabled were an important part in the decision to attend for (86%) of the disabled students, while the relative inexpensiveness of their education was influential for (82%) of the students. Such factors as geographic location and the offering of designed academic program were important for (55%) and (54%) of the disabled students respectively.

When asked about their highest degree aspiration, 32% indicated master's degree, 29% Ph.D or Ed.D, and 25% bachelor's degree. Smaller percentages of disabled students aspired to obtain advanced degrees in law (4%) and medicine (2%). Another significant group difference (Chi square .05) was that 100% of the hearing impaired students planned to achieve beyond the bachelor's level: 80% master's level and 20% doctorate level. Evidence of high educational/vocational aspiration was indicated by mobility impaired students; master's level (42%), doctorate level(38%), as well as deaf students: master's level (29%) and doctorate level (47%).

When asked to hypothetically indicate the most likely reason they would leave their university prior to obtaining their degree, (21%) said due to health related reasons, (11%) other, (10%) because of cost to family, and (9%) disinterest in studies. Thirty eight percent reported that they were absolutely sure that they would obtain a degree prior to leaving.

Vocational Goals

Forty three percent of the disabled students indicated that they were quite certain of their vocational goal at this time. An additional 16% stated that their vocational goal was clearly fixed. However, 27% reported being somewhat uncertain, 7% were quite uncertain, and 6% indicated no specific goal at present. Blind students as a group indicated the highest percentage of students who were quite certain of vocational goals (74%) followed by wheelchair-quadraplegic (57%), learning disabled (50%), and the deaf students (44%).

They reported that the most important factors in their long-term career choices were intrinsic interest in the field (26%), working with people (19%), a well-respected or prestigeous occupation 11%, a great deal of independence 10%, availability of job openings 9%, high anticipated earnings 7%, working with ideas 5% and rapid career advancement 3%. After graduating from college, 53% indicated that they wish to begin a career, while 26% said that they plan to go to graduate school, 9% reported that they wish to get married and begin a career, while an additional 12% said "other."

Tables 2,3 & 4 show the means and standard deviations for items involving social contact (Table 2), comfort and adjustment to the university milieu (Table 3), and the university provisions for disabled students (Table 4). Overall, Table 2 indicates that disabled students tended to feel comfortable

in social settings where they were the sole disabled person. Women felt more comfortable than men being the only disabled person at a party. Also findings not tabled indicate that deaf and hearing impaired women were significantly more uncomfortable than other disabled students when entering a room where a group of people are already talking (MANOVA .05). Table 3 shows that disabled students generally felt comfortable and adjusted in the university environment. Deaf, wheelchair-paraplegic, and wheelchair-quadraplegic students felt significantly more left out of things at the university because of their disability than did other disabled students. Table 4 indicates that, overall, disabled students felt that the university was doing a good job in providing them with opportunities and services.

Table 5 presents means and standard deviations for items evaluating specific disabled student services by disability grouping.

Discussion

This study sought to examine disabled student backgrounds, attitudes, and perceptions of their campus and its services. Results show that close to three-fourths of disabled students reported using services for disabled students at their campus, and on the whole indicate a high degree of satisfaction. Use of disabled student services was mostly by the multiply disabled, learning disabled, deaf and mobility impaired students. Results also indicated that over two-thirds of the disabled students were in one of three disabiltiy categories: mobility impaired, visually impaired and hearing impaired. An examination of disability causality found that hearing and sight impaired students made up the largest group afflicted at birth, while most wheelchair-paraplegic and quadraplegic students attributed their disability to an accident. Students with multiple disabilities reported the highest number of disabilities due to illness. In addition, it was discovered that contrary to stereotype, only 14% of the disabled students, (primarily blind and deaf students), attended a public or private high school for the disabled.

It is noteworthy that, as a group disabled students appear to be older than the typical able-bodied college student. Within-group sex differences indicated that female disabled students tend to be older than their male counterparts. Disabled students who were 18-22 tended to be those with learning disabilities, and sight and hearing impairment. Generally, blind, deaf and the multiply disabled students tended to be older.

Overall, about two-fifths of the disabled students were part-time students with deaf students having the largest percentage of part-timers. Deaf students also comprised the largest percentage of graduate students and students currently employed. Also, over two-thirds of the disabled students aspired to post graduate degrees.

Interestingly, disabled students indicated a greater need for financial aid than for assistance with their disability while in college. Students requesting more assistance with their disability were those with learning disabilities and wheelchair-paraplegics.

Results illustrated that most disabled students usually felt comfortable in situations involving social contact with able-bodied students. As a group female students appeared to be more comfortable than their male counterparts in social situations.

Bohan and Humes (1986) examined the feelings of physically disabled students toward their own disability as a predictor of participation in extracurricular activities and found little relationship between the two. Findings reported by Stovall and Sedlacek (1983) point out that in general, physically disabled students, can expect to experience some difficulty in establishing close relationships with able-bodied students particularly able-bodied males. Stovall and Sedlacek studied reactions of able-bodied students to disabled students in various situations. They also found that blind students could expect the most problems in academic situations (eg. lab partners, study groups), while students in wheelchairs are more likely to have trouble in social situations. Interestingly, the present study showed that deaf students felt more uncomfortable at parties and coming into a room where people were talking than did other disabled students.

Disabled students indicated they felt comfortable with their adjustment to the university milieu, felt that their school was trying to eliminate barriers for the disabled, and that providers of disabled students services were initiating and maintaining equal opportunity for their disability group.

Implications & Recommendations

This study shows not only the attitudes, perceptions, experiences and backgrounds of disabled students from several campuses, but illustrates the important recognition of unique subgroup differences. As we have seen with the term "minority" (Patterson & Sedlacek, 1979), there is a tendency for us to group all persons with disabilities under one umbrella term.

It is important to remember that the attitudes and perceptions of one disabled group cannot be generalized to all disabled students.

It is asked that educators, administrators, counselors and staff review these findings, in order to gain new insights, do away with old stereotypes, and increase sensitivity to varying disabled student characteristics and experiences. It is hoped that with this understanding, university service providers will modify or expand existing programs and/or develop new ones that incorporate and reflect disabled student needs and experiences. This should not only illustrate better service provision, but should assist the transition of disabled students by educating able-bodied students. Stovall and Sedlacek (1983) recommended orientation programs that inform able-bodied students about disabled students' problems. A further step would be the development and provision of workshops that examine able-bodied students' feelings, fears and prejudices about disabled people.

However, there is also a need for more research conducted by student personnel professionals concerning disabled students. Unless we continue to do research, what we do may be influenced more by stereotype than fact. This task may not be an easy one because of problems in definition and disability variations. For example, students with visual impairments may need readers to assist them in filling out and completing questionnaires. Deaf students, on the other hand, are impossible to communicate with by phone, unless the researcher is equipped with a TDD machine, while a quadraplegic student may need help in filling out the questionnaire. Despite these unique research problems, information can and must be obtained.

The uniqueness of disabled people exists not only from an experiential nature, but more importantly, from a human nature. It is a minority group that includes both sexes and does not discriminate along socioeconomic and racial lines, and is one in which most of us will hold membership at some point due to accident, illness or aging. Thus, it should be apparent that in obtaining a better understanding of the disabled student community we gain a better understanding of ourselves.

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TABLE 1

Cause of Disability By Disability Group

	% Congenital	% Illness	% Accident
Hearing Impaired	80	15	5
Sight Impaired	70	10	20
Learning Disabled	67	33	0
Deaf	42	47	12
Blind	40	30	30
Multiply Disabled	33	67	0
Wheelchair-Quadraplegic	14	15	71
Wheelchair-Paraplegic	0	33	67

TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Items Involving Social Contact with Able-bodied Students*

SETTING: You are in a setting where there are no other disabled students except yourself.

ITEMS	MEAN	S.D.
Asking for assistance from others	2.41	1.23
Discussing your disabilities with students	2.20	1.26
Being at a party	2.61	1.30
Dating	2.39	1.22
Coming into a room where a group of people are already talking	2.55	1.19
Competing for grades against other students in a classroom	2.15	1.29

* Based on 5 point scale, 1= very comfortable, 5= very uncomfortable.

TABLE 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Comfort and Adjustment Items *

	MEAN	S.D.
It has been difficult for me to adjust to college - - -	3.72	1.15
Because of my disability, I felt left of of things at my school -	3.47	1.29
Able-bodied students at my college feel superior to me because of my disability - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -	4.05	1.00
There are many things at my college for disabled students to identify with - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -	3.15	1.01
Able-bodied students at my college feel uneasy when interfacing with me - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -	3.46	1.10
As a disabled student, instructors meet my academic needs -	2.43	1.09
Professors and students do not attribute my behavior and abilities to my disability - - - - - - - - - - - -	2.08	1.07

* Based on 5 point scale, 1= strongly agree, 5= stronely disagree

TABLE 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Items Concerning University Provisions for Disabled Students*

	MEANS	S.D.
I feel that the disabled student services at my college are helpful with preregistration provedures - - - - -	1.86	1.01
My college is trying to eliminate barriers for disabled students -	2.13	1.01
I feel that the disabled student services at my college are helpful with registration procedures - - - - - - -	1.89	.91
I feel that the disabled student services at my college have provided services to insure equal opportunity at the school for students with my disability- - - - - - - - -	2.09	.98

* Based on 5 point scale, 1= strongly agree, 5= strongly disagree

TABLE 5

Means and Standard Deviations for Items Evaluating Disabled Student Services by Disability Groupings *

I have been very satisfied with the following services provided by the Disabled Student Services at my college: (complete only for your disability(ies))

	MEAN	S.D.
VISUAL IMPAIRMENT:		
Reader services	2.45	1.28
Writer for test/quizzes	2.15	.90
Assistance in ordering materials from "Recordings for the Blind"	2.16	1.12
Orientation to campus	2.13	1.13
Availability of large print materials	2.78	.67
Classroom note taking	2.55	1.13
HEARING IMPAIRMENT:		
Classroom note taking	2.71	1.16
TDD/amplified telephones	2.00	1.14
WHEEL-CHAIR USERS:		
Assignments of classes to accessible locations	1.83	1.01
Assistance with recruitment of personal care attendants	2.58	.90
NEUROMUSCULAR IMPAIRMENT:		
Writers for test/quizzes	1.55	.58
Assistance with note taking	1.83	1.30

* Based on 5 point scale, 1= strongly agree, 5= strongly disagree.